

The Dominant Conception of Educational Equality: Ideal *and* Ideology

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The dominant conception of educational equality in the contemporary United States is meritocratic. Harry Brighouse succinctly delineates this conception as follows:

An individual's prospects for educational achievement should be a function only of that individual's effort and [natural] talent, not of his or her social class background.¹

Central to the meritocratic conception is the requirement that the distribution of education track the distribution of natural talents, not characteristics such as social class background. And we could add other “morally irrelevant” characteristics, race and gender being at the top of the list. Of course, distribution based on talent and effort is not free of constraints vis-à-vis a permissible level of inequality, at least not for liberal egalitarians. Liberal egalitarians typically conjoin the meritocratic conception with some prioritarian or leveling-up principle of equalization. On the flip side, equalization may be traded-off against other principles, such as parental autonomy. In general, the meritocratic conception is defeasible.

In this essay I criticize the idea of natural talent as exemplifying an *ideal* in Charles Mills's sense of an “idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual.”² I contend that the idea of natural talent, in turn, works hand in glove with an *ideology* in Mills's sense of a “set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege.”³ I then briefly sketch an alternative to the meritocratic conception based on an adaptation of John Rawls's conception of democratic equality. The argument will unfold in three sections: “The Myth of Natural Talent,” “A Wheel That Turns though Nothing Else Moves?,” and “Educational Equality without the Myth.”

I. THE MYTH OF NATURAL TALENT

The meritocratic conception is suspect to the extent that its central idea of natural talent is suspect. And that the idea of natural talent is suspect — indeed, highly so — is just what I aim to establish in this section.

I realize that in challenging the idea of natural talent, I am up against a deep-seated, intuitively compelling belief that has survived since Plato and that has been the object of considerable scientific research. And there are surely cases in which the existence of natural talents — or “natural endowments,” as Rawls often calls them — seems ineluctable. Consider children with congenital anomalies, such as microcephaly, or those exposed to environmental toxins, such as lead. These children have biophysical attributes that are predictive of restricted levels of academic performance. But we can't infer from these special cases the more general claim that academic performance universally tracks some underlying level of natural intellectual talent associated with some inborn trait, or would if morally irrelevant factors didn't get in the way. The inference turns on a very weak argument from

analogy: that because in some cases biophysical factors are known to contribute to differences in academic performance, such causes must contribute to differences in academic performance in all cases.

The appeal to natural talent as the explanation of differential performance can also be challenged more directly, with evidence that nurture does much more to explain differences in performance than nature does, including in cases of individuals whose performance is so extraordinary that intuition strongly supports recourse to natural talent as the explanation. This is precisely the form of the challenge advanced by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*.⁴ Using the examples of Mozart, Bill Gates, and professional hockey players, among others, Gladwell argues compellingly that rather than natural talent, it is practice (the 10,000 hour rule), social position, available opportunity, being in the right place at the right time, and other features of happenstance, that account for success in various endeavors.

Of particular interest from among Gladwell's examples is his examination of psychologist Lewis Terman's longitudinal study of the relationship between IQ and success. IQ has a long and controversial history in the distribution of education and continues to be used, for example, to identify "gifted and talented" children for sought after educational opportunities and to identify other children for special education. In a longitudinal study initiated early in the twentieth century (and still ongoing), Terman identified approximately 1,500 school children with IQs exceeding 140 — the "termites," as they were called — and tracked them over their lives. Terman believed that IQ was a measure of natural intellectual talent that would produce a high degree of success in life. Much to Terman's disappointment, his years of painstaking data collection revealed that IQ had little power to predict success beyond what family background alone could predict

More specific to education than IQ is the concept of aptitude. Aptitude (or ability) tests purported to measure more specialized elements of the generalized intellectual talent that IQ tests purportedly measure. The use of aptitude tests to distribute education also engendered controversy. And although not nearly as much in the public eye as IQ tests, aptitude tests have also been forcefully criticized for their inability to isolate natural talent in measuring and predicting academic performance.

Leaders in psychometric theory such as Anne Anastasi and Samuel Messick argued quite convincingly in the 1980s that educational tests can only measure developed talent, not natural or innate talent.⁵ For there is no effective way to isolate developed talent from motivation, previous opportunities, and how these interact with one another to produce measured performance. To the extent natural talents exist, they can manifest themselves only under conditions favorable to their development. Thus, over time natural talents become thoroughly melded with nurture — which, we now know, begins in the womb. Considerations such as these led the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to effectively endorse Anastasi's and Messick's view and to distance itself from any claims about measuring academic aptitude. In 1994, ETS changed the name of the "Scholastic Aptitude Test" to the "Scholastic Assessment Tests."⁶ My colleagues in educational measurement tell me that the effort to define

and measure aptitude as distinct from academic performance is no longer a live pursuit in the field.

The preceding considerations are not sufficient to decisively establish that natural talents do not exist. Moreover, certain contemporary psychological research purports to show that higher levels of performance track higher levels of talent at an aggregate level.⁷ I have my doubts about this research, but for my purposes here I am not required to establish the strong ontic claim that natural talents do not exist. I am only required to establish the weaker epistemic claim that purported measures of natural talent cannot accurately predict performance except in atypical cases. Thus, even if true, the findings regarding a relationship between natural talent and performance at the aggregate level are irrelevant to the distribution of educational opportunities. The distribution of measured levels of natural talents so overlaps with the distribution of measured levels of performance that no credible inference can be made in individual cases from a given level of natural talent to a corresponding level of performance.

The field of behavioral genetics provides no greater support for the idea of natural talent than do the fields of psychology and psychometrics. Some skeptics argue it is time once again to “reinter” behavioral genetics, which continues to be resurrected from faulty and marginal thinking within the field that has strong intuitive appeal to the public and to policymakers.⁸ But even those more sympathetic to the project of behavioral genetics and who remain optimistic about its potential for future contributions do not embrace genetic determinism, or anything close to it.⁹ Genetic influences are not conceived independent of their manifestations within the environment. The ultimate goal of behavioral genetics is to better understand how to enhance human development across genetically linked variation in predispositions, not to reconcile ourselves to what nature has ordained as unalterable.

Importantly, both the skeptical and more optimistic views on behavioral genetics reject the idea of tracking natural talent in the distribution of educational opportunities. To the extent genetic information could have any application to distributing educational opportunity, which, at best, is a very long way off, it would not be to identify natural talent and take measures to insure that academic performance tracked it. Rather, it would be to design educational environments that would most enhance the development of talent for all.

Frances Horowitz provides an admonition to human development researchers to which philosophers of education would also do well to heed:

If we accept as a challenge the need to act with social responsibility then we must make sure that we do not use single-variable words like genes or the notion of innate in such a determinative manner as to give the impression that they constitute the simple answers to the simple questions asked by the Person in the Street lest we contribute to belief systems that will inform social policies that seek to limit experience and opportunity and, ultimately, development, especially when compounded with racism and poorly advantaged circumstances.¹⁰

II. A WHEEL THAT TURNS THOUGH NOTHING ELSE MOVES?

Wittgenstein remarked in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism.”¹¹ The

conclusion that might be drawn from my argument so far is that the meritocratic conception simply has no application and, therefore, has no effect on education policy and practice. Thus, it is like Wittgenstein's disengaged wheel. And taking the defeasibility of the meritocratic conception into account buttresses this conclusion. Except in relatively rare cases, each potential application would either rest on the untenable assumption that natural talent has been successfully isolated, as when IQ testing is used in admissions to gifted programs, or would have to be overridden, as in affirmative action to further diversity.

But, in my view, this misses the mark, as my use of Horowitz's admonition to end the last section may have signaled. I labeled natural talent a *myth* rather than an *illusion* for a reason. A myth may be defined as a "fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology."¹² Plato's "myth of the metals," for example, fits this definition to a tee. Today, of course, we have genetics and IQ testing rather than the alchemy of the gods and performance assessment under the watchful eye of the Guardians to account for and measure the natural talents that fix our limits before we are born. But natural talents are illusive. They have no manifestation independent of environmental influences; they function as unobserved posits used to explain differences in observed human performance.

As posits, natural talents fit quite comfortably within ideal political theory that, according to Charles Mills, "has served to rationalize the status quo."¹³ Mills makes an explicit appeal to standpoint epistemology in suggesting how ideal theory came to be and why it is women, immigrants, and people of color for whom it prompts significant cognitive dissonance, not white males of European origin. It should tell us something that African American social critics from W. E. B. Du Bois to Derrick Bell to Lani Guinier have been pointed critics of educational testing, particularly as a purported measure of natural mental talent,¹⁴ while it is two white males of European origin, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, who pursued the most recent effort to justify racial hierarchy as tracking a natural hierarchy of talent.¹⁵

We may safely assume that no meritocratic egalitarian would endorse Herrnstein and Murray's thesis that natural talent is race-linked. A meritocratic egalitarian might even go so far as to reject the discernibility of natural talent altogether (a point I will come back to in my brief consideration of Rawls). But the basic procedures for distributing educational opportunities spawned by the myth of natural talent remain in place and continue to exemplify patterns strongly associated with race and class. These include, as mentioned before, IQ testing for placement in special education and gifted programs, as well as placement in curricular tracking schemes based on teachers' perceptions of students natural talent.¹⁶ Notwithstanding, most experts in educational measurement deny tests can make any claim to be measuring natural talent. And clearly other standard criteria of education performance that are combined with test scores to assign merit — GPA, teacher judgment, "grit," and the like — can make no claim to being indicators of natural talent either. In the absence of any defensible method of isolating natural talent, some conception other than the meritocratic one must serve as the basis for the just distribution of education, whether to justify the current practices or some alternatives.

Or, so it would seem. Meritocratic egalitarians appear to be unaware of, or unmoved by, the tenuous epistemic status of natural talents. Rawls, for example, came to explicitly embrace the idea that there is no defensible method of isolating natural talent, but he did not abandon his meritocratic view as a result. By briefly examining Rawls's evolving position, we can get a better understanding of what kind of things natural talents must be in the meritocratic framework. This will help shed light on how the meritocratic conception of educational equality is liable to the charge of rationalizing educational inequality.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls assumes that “the distribution of natural assets is a fact of nature and that no attempt is made to change it.”¹⁷ Among the things that count as natural assets are natural talents and natural endowments, physical and intellectual. These natural talents and endowments are social assets to be used for common advantage. Deviations from equality in the distribution of goods are permissible where they use natural talents and endowments to most benefit the least advantaged. This should all be quite familiar to an audience of philosophers. What I want to emphasize is that in *A Theory of Justice* the idea of natural talents as fixed — “a fact of nature” — is quite central to Rawls's meritocratic conception of fair equality of opportunity, and there seems to be no significant change from this position in *Political Liberalism*.¹⁸

In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, however, Rawls provides a more nuanced characterization of natural talents. At the beginning of this book, Rawls seems to be retracing his steps from *A Theory of Justice* with assertions such as this:

[T]hose who have the same level of talent and ability and the same willingness to use these gifts should have the same prospects of success regardless of their social class of origin.¹⁹

But a few pages later he says,

[N]ative endowments of various kinds (say, native intelligence and natural ability) are not fixed natural assets with a constant capacity. They are merely potential and cannot come to fruition apart from social conditions.... Among what affects their realizations are social attitudes of encouragement and support, and institutions concerned with their early discipline and use. Not only our conception of ourselves, and our aims and ambitions, but also our realized abilities and talents, reflect our personal history, opportunities and social position, and the influence of good and ill fortune.²⁰

Notice here that native endowments are not fixed, but merely potential and must be brought to fruition in the social world. Later in *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls draws out an important implication of this much more fluid conception of native endowments: “a usable measure of native endowments seems out of the question, even in theory.”²¹

Rawls thus agrees here with my claim of the previous section that natural talent cannot be discerned in individual cases. But he draws no further conclusions about the broader implications of this, which leaves quite in doubt how the Rawlsian meritocratic conception might apply to the noisy, contingent, non-idealized world of education policy. Because we can have no measure of native endowments — *even in theory* — the meritocratic conception is either altogether disengaged from the world of education policy, which, I take it, would be fatal; or it supplies an *idealized orientation* that cannot be directly *applied* but, nonetheless, somehow *guides* policy formation.

So, how might this work? The idealized orientation must remain committed to the existence of natural talents, despite their epistemic tenuousness. Otherwise, there would be no foundation for conceptualizing a just distribution of education in terms of a fair competition to bring natural talents to fruition. And natural talents must be presumed to have some non-malleable core. Otherwise, they would lose all distinctiveness over time, due to “personal history, opportunities and social position, and the influence of good and ill fortune.” But this renders natural talents akin to things in themselves, standing behind observation but totally inaccessible to it. Alternatively, the idea of natural talents might be rescued by identifying a natural talent with a range of possibilities, as suggested by Rawls’s description of natural talents as “merely potential.” But this just takes us back to the argument from analogy that I dismissed earlier. We can specify a relatively restricted range of performance for people with certain discernable biophysical characteristics, but not for the vast majority of others. For the most part, natural talent is a will-o’-the-wisp that we cannot grasp concretely and use to explain differences in performance. In either case, whether will-o’-the-wisp or thing in itself, the idea of natural talent can’t play any role in the real world of education policy. Or, I should say, it can’t play the role it is intended to by meritocratic egalitarians. Instead, as I suggested earlier, it functions within the meritocratic conception to rationalize educational inequality. This happens in at least four ways.

First, the belief that natural talents underlie performance encourages a *default* explanation for unequal academic performance in schools: if we can identify no differences in *nurture* to explain the differences, it must be unobserved differences in *nature* that explain the differences. This, in turn, reconciles us to stubborn educational inequality as a “fact of nature” that we can do nothing about. In education practice, it provides the rationale for several practices referred to before.

Again, meritocratic egalitarians would deny that academic performance differences associated with race or gender can or should be explained by differences in nature. So, the default explanation for them would be nurture when it comes to *between-group* comparisons. But at least with respect to differences *within* these groups, the default explanation must be invoked. Otherwise, if no assumption is made about natural talent being distributed unequally within groups and resulting in differential educational performance, it can be dispensed with altogether and nurture alone can be used to explain differences in educational performance.

So far my focus has been on natural talent, one element of the meritocratic conception. The other element is the willingness to exert effort (which I will hereafter shorten to “motivation”). It also needs to be problematized, for a second way in which the meritocratic conception helps rationalize — and reproduce — educational inequality results from its assumption that motivation can, like natural talent, be isolated and that children or their parents are to be held responsible for its development.

There should be a weaker attachment to the idea that motivation can be isolated from social and cultural forces than to the idea that natural talent can be so isolated. In addition to folk wisdom, sociologists have provided credible theories to explain the

development of aspirations and the means of achieving them as a function of social class. Regarding education in particular, sociologists in the *categorical* tradition, which includes Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Willis, and Annette Lareau, have theorized social class in terms of a “cultural logic” to which parents and children of a given class conform that advantages or disadvantages them in navigating the norms and goals of educational institutions.²² Distributing children’s educational opportunities on the basis of their motivation to pursue what schools deem important thus serves to rationalize a process that coincides with, and reproduces, class-based educational inequality.²³

Regarding who is responsible for children’s motivation, it is altogether inappropriate to assign responsibility to children themselves, at least until they reach a certain level of maturity. Educators do not and should not simply defer to children’s lack of motivation in school, and then let them suffer the consequences. As I have suggested elsewhere,²⁴ we would not be treating six-year-old Susan fairly if we determined that she had insufficient merit to be taught to read because she had a preference for tetherball over reading. It is educators’ responsibility to make efforts to develop children’s motivation to apply themselves in school, or, if need be, to finesse their lack of it.

The onus cannot be placed entirely on educators, however, especially when they are functioning within an institution conceived in terms of responding to and furthering individual merit. Thus, the responsibility for children’s motivation to perform well in school, or at least a large part of this responsibility, is often transferred to their parents.²⁵ But the idea that when children lack merit, it is because parents have failed to cultivate it is overly simplistic; it ignores the effect of incongruent cultural logics in disadvantaging some parents in their dealings with schools and in preparing their children to succeed in them. Moreover, to whatever extent parents might be justifiably characterized as failing, their children should not bear the consequences.

A third way in which the meritocratic conception helps rationalize — and reproduce — educational inequality is by encouraging an overestimation of the power of schools alone to reduce educational inequality. The commitment to the existence of natural talent, in combination with the assumption that it is equally distributed among social class groups, in combination with the fact that there exist significant achievement gaps among identifiable social class groups, implies that much natural talent must be latent in groups at the lower end of the gap. Schools are responsible for identifying and developing this talent²⁶ such that the distributions of achievement across social class groups are the same or nearly the same and the achievement gap is thereby eliminated or significantly reduced. For this to be successful, it will also surely be necessary to provide a further education for those who need it in so-called “soft skills,” associated with the willingness to apply effort and the knowledge of where to focus it.

This approach may be the best we can do now and for the foreseeable future; and, if done right,²⁷ it has the potential to yield modest positive outcomes. But that should not obscure the fact that it is fundamentally flawed. It rests on an additive

or “gradational” framework in which natural talent and motivation are conceived as distinct factors that go into determining merit.²⁸ The alternative to this approach is the kind of “categorical” approach described earlier, in which talent is developed in conjunction with the willingness to devote effort (again, to what schools deem important).²⁹ A significant portion of this process occurs outside of schools and over an extended period of time. Those middle-class parents who exemplify the parenting style that Lareau calls “concerted cultivation” expend considerable effort to nurture their children in a way that results in a more seamless and efficacious fit with the institution of schools (which these parents also enjoy) than is typically experienced by parents and children of the working class.³⁰ In Lareau’s categorical approach, talents, the willingness to devote effort, interaction styles, and the like are melded by a cultural logic into a whole that cannot be separated into distinctive parts that can simply be added to one another. The strategy of having schools identify and develop latent talent in working-class children and then augment this with soft skills and other compensating measures is severely limited in its capacity to produce a significant improvement in educational equality beyond the barrier created by class-based cultural logics and associated inequality in social, cultural, and financial capital.

A fourth way in which the meritocratic conception helps rationalize — and reproduce — educational inequality is by its embrace of a fair competition as the model for the fair distribution of education.³¹ The ultimate rewards for winning the competition are employment, income, wealth, and other private goods. The competition is fair if only talent and effort determine the winners, not morally irrelevant characteristics of individuals such as social class background and the like.

Two previous points apply here. First, it is out of place to put children in competition based on their merits, for children cannot defensibly be held responsible for their talents and motivations and thus should not have their welfare determined in this way. Second, a determination cannot be made as to whether a given educational performance tracks talent and motivation independent of social class. And unless this determination can be made, the judgment that talent and motivation alone are responsible for a given educational performance must be by default. Again, this reconciles us to stubborn educational inequality as a “fact of nature” that we can do little or nothing about. And I suspect this conception of things sits quite comfortably with those who have an edge in the competition due not to some raw talent and motivation, but to their class-based advantages.

I end this section with a clarification. In challenging the ideas of *natural* talent and *natural* motivation (if that’s the way to describe motivation as isolatable), I do not mean to imply that *developed* talent and *developed* motivation are not relatively stable. Over time, children will develop relatively stable skills, abilities, likes and dislikes, and so on, that educators must take into account in designing and distributing differential educational opportunities. But the key here is that although *stable*, these things are not thereby *innate* or *natural*. Developed talents and motivation are not a fact of nature but products of the kinds of processes described by Gladwell and Lareau, in which human practices and institutions are strongly implicated. It

follows that we cannot get off the hook for educational inequality by deferring to the inevitability of nature.

III. EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY WITHOUT THE MYTH (OR, A RAWLSIAN VIEW SANS NATURAL TALENTS)

One place to start in developing an alternative to the meritocratic conception of educational equality is by pursuing an answer to the following question: what if Rawls had taken more seriously the implications of his claims that “native endowments ... are not fixed natural assets with a constant capacity [but are] merely potential and cannot come to fruition apart from social conditions” and that “a usable measure of native endowments seems out of the question”?³²

As it turns out, Elizabeth Anderson has explored this vein. Like me, she finds the meritocratic conception highly problematic. Unlike me, she does not challenge natural talents in a direct way; rather, she more or less brushes the issue aside.³³ She describes her focus as “the asymmetrical distribution of human knowledge and talents ... based not on nature or genetics but on the epistemological consequences of social inequality.”³⁴ She rejects Rawls’s ideal theory approach in favor of “constructing workable criteria of justice in educational opportunity for our currently unjust world,” but in a way that speaks to two Rawlsian insights: one, that human knowledge and talents should be conceived as public goods; and two, that they should be distributed so as to benefit everyone. She argues that the meritocratic conception cannot accomplish this because it is rooted in the politics of envy.³⁵

Anderson’s general view³⁶ is typically associated with an adequacy, or threshold, or sufficientarian principle of distributive justice, *as opposed to* an equalization principle. This characterization is misleading.³⁷ “Democratic equality,” Anderson’s Rawlsian label that I also adopt, is “egalitarian in its conception of just relationships among citizens but sufficientarian in its conception of justice in the distribution of resources and opportunities.”³⁸ It is important to note that although equality is not required in the distribution of educational resources and opportunities, the level of permissible inequality in these respects is significantly constrained by the requirement of equal citizenship.

Democratic equality need not assume the existence of natural talent and motivation, which are required by the meritocratic conception in order to ensure that educational opportunity tracks these as independent of social class, race, and gender. Democratic equality need only assume that, in general, human beings have the potential capacity to participate in effective democratic deliberation. It then requires that the conditions — social, cultural, political, educational, and economic — required for the development and practice of deliberative capacity be in place.³⁹

Regarding the role of formal education, the capacity to effectively participate in democratic deliberation requires more than the cognitive academic skills and knowledge that the current K–12 curriculum so myopically focuses on in order to prepare students for their next competitions for higher education and the job market. Academic skills and knowledge alone are insufficient.⁴⁰ Generally speaking,

academic skills and knowledge are too abstract and disembodied to provide genuine access to the different life experiences from which different perspectives and “felt difficulties” derive. Academic skills and knowledge can be applied to practical problems only to the extent that difficulties have indeed been felt and have broken through to consciousness. But much lies below consciousness, is habitual, and goes unchallenged, including various sources of bias.⁴¹ Those at the top of the advantage hierarchy proceed largely unimpeded, reproducing inequality. They are not necessarily overly self-interested or mean-spirited, but they are insular, cut off from the knowledge and skills they need in order to foster democratic equality.

Given this picture, certain kinds of knowledge, as well as ignorance, exist at both ends of the hierarchy of advantage. Closing the achievement gap by leveling up the bottom will not remedy the problem of democratic inequality and is unlikely to occur to any appreciable degree when addressed in isolation, solely in terms of what Anderson calls a “single hierarchy of cognitive development.”⁴² Rather, the work must encompass more than narrowly conceived cognitive development and be done from both ends of the spectrum Meira Levinson has labeled the “civic empowerment gap,”⁴³ including not just from the end occupied by those who may be lacking negotiable social and cultural capital but also from the end occupied by those whom Anderson identifies as the democratically incompetent elite.⁴⁴

Working from both ends in this way, democratic equality does not have the compensatory thrust of a Rawlsian view tethered to natural talents, nor of popular conceptions of educational equality that adopt leveling up as the means of closing the achievement and soft skills gaps. And democratic equality takes a view different from the meritocratic conception on the much fussed about matter of education as a *positional good*.⁴⁵ In the meritocratic conception, educational accomplishments function within a competitive system of distribution. The competition is zero-sum:⁴⁶ there can only be so many winners, and when any given individual increases the quantity and quality of her education, it increases her chances and diminishes the chances of others to win the competition and the prize of increased access to goods such as employment, income, and wealth. The competition is rendered fair by ensuring the winners are determined solely on the basis of natural talent and motivation.

Our current system weakly approximates this ideal. I say “weakly” because natural talent and motivation must be posited; they cannot be culled from developed talent and motivation. Educational opportunities are, in fact, distributed on the basis of stable, but developed, talents and motivation. This rigs the competition in favor of members of advantaged groups. Provided the meritocratic principle is not overridden by prioritarian or other principles, thus suspending the competition, only those members of less advantaged groups who considerably exceed their baseline expectations have a good chance of competing.

I will set aside the question of whether this competition might be rendered more fair,⁴⁷ because democratic equality rejects competition as the means by which to distribute educational opportunities and, along with it, the meritocratic conception’s particular construal of education as a positional good. Education functions within

the current distributional system as a positional good in a certain way: the improved positions of some come at the expense of worsened position of others. But things don't have to work this way. Democratic equality seeks to put people into democratic relationship as equal citizens, constraining the level of inequality in resources and opportunities required to do so.⁴⁸ Citizens living under democratic equality view the talents possessed by themselves and others as social assets to be used for the benefit of all. Under this normative system of distribution, whatever positional advantage individuals might gain by developing their talents does not come at the cost of others in the overall scheme.⁴⁹

I have argued that educational opportunities cannot be distributed on the basis of natural talent and motivation because we cannot isolate these from morally arbitrary contingencies such as the social class into which one is born. But isn't it unjust to distribute educational opportunities on the basis of developed talents and motivations when we know their development is influenced by social class? It is not as if there is a choice, at least for the time being. And the moral arbitrariness of social class is really no different from the moral arbitrariness of the talents we would draw in the natural lottery if there were such a thing.⁵⁰ Thus, the idea of tracking natural talent doesn't avoid the problem of the distribution of education being infused with some moral arbitrariness. The best we can do is to ensure the distributional scheme is based on promoting the benefit of all and that we work to eliminate known sources of unfair advantage and disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

It might be objected that I am simply substituting one ideal and ideology for another ideal and ideology. This charge doesn't stick unless we fail to distinguish two meanings of "ideal" and "ideology" identified by Mills. Democratic equality is certainly an ideal in the sense of being a normative ideal that is not going to be realized any time soon, if ever. But unlike the meritocratic ideal, it does not rely on positing idealized constructs that engage other parts of the ideal but not the world — in other words, it is not an "idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual."⁵¹

In the broad sense of the concept of ideology in currency nowadays, democratic equality is, indeed, an ideology, or part of one. But it is not an ideology in the sense of "a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege."⁵² It is the meritocratic ideal that is an ideology, or part of one, in that sense. Or so I have argued.

1. Harry Brighouse, "Moral and Political Aspects of Education" in *Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42. I have inserted "natural" as a modifier of talent because natural talent is what Brighouse intends, as opposed to developed talent. This is made quite clear in the paragraph immediately following the one in which the characterization of the meritocratic occurs, where Brighouse distinguishes natural from social advantages.

2. Charles Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 168.

3. *Ibid.*, 166.

4. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, 2nd e-book ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2011).

5. Anne Anastasi, "Aptitude and Achievement Tests: The Curious Case of the Indestructible Strawperson," *Social and Technical Issues in Testing: Implications for Test Construction and Usage* (Paper 9, 1984), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/burostestingissues/9>; and Samuel Messick, "9. Abilities and Knowledge in Educational Achievement Testing: The Assessment of Dynamic Cognitive Structures," *Social and Technical Issues in Testing: Implications for Test Construction and Usage* (Paper 11, 1984), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/burostestingissues/11>.
6. Peter Applebome, "Insisting It's Nothing, Creator Says SAT, Not S.A.T.," *New York Times*, April 2, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/02/us/insisting-it-s-nothing-creator-says-sat-not-sat.html> (accessed 1-23-2014).
7. David Z. Hambrick and Elizabeth J. Meinz, "Limits on the Predictive Power of Domain-Specific Experience and Knowledge in Skilled Performance," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 5 (2011): 275–279, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0963721411422061>; Piers Steel, "Hard Work Beats Talent (but Only If Talent Doesn't Work Hard)," *The Procrastination Equation* (blog), *Psychology Today*, October 8, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-procrastination-equation/201110/hard-work-beats-talent-only-if-talent-doesn-t-work-hard>; and Robert Hauser, "Causes and Consequences of Cognitive Functioning Across the Life Course," *Educational Researcher* 39, no. 2 (2010): 95–109, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X10363171>.
8. Richard Lerner, "Another Nine-Inch Nail for Behavioral Genetics!," *Human Development* 49 (2006): 336–342.
9. Matt McGue, "The End of Behavioral Genetics?," *Behavioral Genetics* 40, no. 3 (2010): 284–296.
10. Quoted in Lerner, "Another Nine-Inch Nail for Behavioral Genetics!," 340.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), sec. 271.
12. *The Free Online Dictionary*, s. v. "myth" (accessed March 12, 2017), <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/myth>.
13. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 181.
14. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Race Intelligence," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995); Derrick Bell *Silent Covenants: Brown v. the Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Susan Sturm and Lani Guinier, "The Future of Affirmative Action: Reclaiming the Innovative Deal," *California Law Review* 84, no. 4 (1996): 953–1036, <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/californialawreview/vol84/iss4/3>.
15. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
16. Mark C. Vopat, "Magnet Schools, Innate Talent, and Social Justice," *Theory and Research in Education* 9, no. 1 (2011): 59–72, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1477878510394811>; Jeannie Oakes, Amy Stuart Wells, Makeba Jones, and Amanda Datnow, "Detracking: The Social Construction of Ability, Cultural Politics, and Resistance to Reform," *Teachers College Record* 98, no. 3 (1997): 482–510; and Kevin S. McGrew and Jeffrey Evans, "Expectations for Students with Cognitive Disabilities: Is the Cup Half Empty or Half Full? Can the Cup Flow Over?" (Synthesis Report 55) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2004), <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Synthesis55.html>.
17. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1971), 92.
18. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
19. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2001), 44.
20. *Ibid.*, 57.
21. *Ibid.*, 158. Rawls makes this claim in the context of rejecting a head tax on the talented as a just principle of redistribution.
22. This is described by Annette Lareau in various places in the main body and in Appendix B of *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).
23. Brighouse, as well as Rawls, would disallow differences in effort that track social class to be the basis of distribution. The problem, given my reading of Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods*, is that the willingness to exert effort cannot be isolated from social class except, arguably, in those few "beat the odds" cases. This, I would say, is a paradigm case of the exception proving the rule. Interestingly, Brighouse cites

Unequal Childhoods approvingly in “Educational Equality and School Reform,” in *Educational Equality*, ed. Graham Haydon (New York: Continuum, 2012), 15–70.

24. Kenneth Howe, “On Equality versus Adequacy: Principles and Normative Frameworks,” in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), 452–460.

25. Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*. Assigning parents responsibility for improving student achievement and the schools their children attend is embraced by Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama, as well as the president himself. See “Do Parents Care Enough About Schools,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/02/09/blaming-parents-for-poor-schools>.

26. Consider the federally sponsored Talent Search Program, for example (see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/triotalent/index.html>).

27. This means not depending on a rigorous standards/testing regime and school choice to fix the problem as in recent U.S. education policy, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top.

28. Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, chap. 2.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

31. Brighouse, for example, asserts that although society is not literally a race, “our society is relevantly like a race. The distribution of the benefits of social cooperation is structured to reward those who do well and penalize those who do badly in competitions they have no feasible alternative to participating in” (Brighouse, “Educational Equality and School Reform,” 30, emphasis in original). Elsewhere, Brighouse asserts “Educational equality means at a minimum, that resources devoted to a child’s education should not depend on the ability of their parents to pay, or choose well among educational experiences, on the assumption that educational experiences will yield opportunities for the rewards distributed by the labor market” (Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 122–123).

32. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 57 and 158.

33. I think my direct approach has the advantage of making the need for an alternative more apparent. This is not meant as a criticism of Anderson.

34. Elizabeth Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Approach,” *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 621

35. Elizabeth Anderson, “Rethinking Equality of Opportunity: Comment on Adam Swift’s *How Not to Be a Hypocrite*,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 2 (2004): 99–110.

36. Within this camp are also included Debra Satz “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 623–648; Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Kenneth Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice Democracy and Schooling* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

37. In “On Equality versus Adequacy,” I distinguish between adequacy versus equality *frameworks* and adequacy versus equality *principles* to make a similar point.

38. Anderson, “Rethinking Equality of Opportunity,” 106.

39. Gutmann, in her book *Democratic Education*, has done the most to articulate the constraints within which democratic equality should be negotiated. See also Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity*.

40. A comprehensive account is provided by Anderson, in “Fair Opportunity in Education”; and in Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

41. Among these are *stereotypes* that tend to exaggerate between-group differences and minimize within-group differences, leading to erroneous judgments about individuals; *attribution bias*, the psychological tendency to attribute behavior to internal rather than external causes; *system justification bias*, the tendency to view the status quo as just and to attribute good internal characteristics to high-status individuals and bad internal characteristics to those of low status; and *in-group favoritism* and *shared reality bias*, both of which are fairly self-explanatory. These concepts are taken from Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*.

42. Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education,” 621.

43. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

44. Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*.

45. See, for example, William S. Koski and Rob Reich, "When 'Adequate' Isn't: The Retreat from Equity in Education Law and Policy and Why It Matters," *Emory Law Journal* 56, no. 3 (2006): 545–615; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2009): 117–128; and Brighouse, "Educational Equality and School Reform."

46. More precisely, it is zero-sum for the "instrumental benefits" of education, such as employment and income, but not for the "intrinsic benefits," such as appreciation for literature (Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 117).

47. I am skeptical that more than marginal improvements can be made under a meritocratic regime because of what sociologists tell us about the propensity of those at the top of the advantage hierarchy to act to maintain their advantage in response to change. For a recent study documenting the phenomenon of "maximally maintained inequality," see Thurston Domina and Joshua Saldana, "Does Raising the Bar Level the Playing Field? Mathematics Curricular Intensification and Inequality in American Schools, 1982–2004," *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 4 (2012): 685–708. From another angle, Anderson sees the meritocratic regime as exemplifying a "politics of envy," which would encourage people to do just what sociologists who employ the concept of "maximally maintained inequality" say they do; see Anderson, "Rethinking Equality of Opportunity," and "Fair Opportunity in Education."

48. Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," links this to Rawls's difference principle as applied to the primary good of the social bases of self-respect. This limits the degree to which education should be conceived in terms of a fair competition versus fostering self-respect by fostering robust democratic relationships.

49. Under such an arrangement, according to Rawls, "it is not in general to the advantage of the less fortunate to propose policies which reduce the talents of others" (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 107). This is in contrast to the politics of envy associated with the meritocratic framework of fair competition (Anderson, "Rethinking Equality of Opportunity," and "Fair Opportunity in Education").

50. Brighouse is sensitive to this issue, and it leads him to entertain the "radical" conception of educational equality, in which only differences in motivation justify unequal distributions. He ultimately rejects the radical conception on the grounds that it would sanction leveling down or huge expenditures to educate children with cognitive disabilities (= natural [dis]abilities). But notice that there is no need to appeal to natural ability/disability to draw Brighouse's conclusion regarding limits on the resources to children with serious learning difficulties. The same conclusion can be reached where such difficulties are acquired but stable, as, for example, in the case of a child who is defiant, sees little value in school, and is very unlikely to learn what school has to offer because of a difficult home life. (See Gutmann's discussion of the cases of Rebecca versus Amy in *Democratic Education*, chap. 5). The difference in these two approaches is that whereas nature is the cause of the problem in the first approach, it is human action/inaction that is the cause in the second.

51. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 168.

52. *Ibid.*, 166.